

# **Cultural Adjustment Experiences Saudi Women International Graduate Students Studying First Time in a Mixed-Gender Environment at a United States University**

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## **Abstract**

*The qualitative study investigated the cultural adjustment experiences of Saudi Women International Graduate Students studying for the first time in a mixed-gender environment in the United States. Questions for the study invited the Saudi women to share prior expectations about coming to study in the United States compared to the reality of their experiences as international students. They discussed what they most and least enjoyed about studying and living in the US cultural differences, acculturative stress, and cultural adjustment at different time periods, English proficiency, social support, and communication / relationships with Americans. Themes emerged from the qualitative data analysis coding process that indicated their acculturation process within the psychosocial and academic contexts was most impacted by the significant influence that the female student's cultural identity had on the experience of being in a non-segregated, mixed-gender social and academic environment for the first time.*

**Keywords:** Cultural Identity, Gender Saudi Women, Cross-cultural transition, International Education

## **1. Introduction**

In the late 1970s, the number of international students from Saudi Arabia (SA) in the United States (US) increased rapidly, peaking in 1980/81 with 10,440 students. After that, there was a period of student population fluctuation, until 1993/94, at which time numbers began to steadily increase until 2001/02. In the 2002/03 academic year, enrollments dropped 25% and continued to decline, reaching a low of about 3,000 students in 2004/05. In 2005/06, when participants in the newly-formed King Abdullah Saudi Scholarship Program (KASP) began enrolling in US universities, the number of Saudi students rose by 14%. With the scholarship program in place, the number of students showed a dramatic rise of 129% in 2006/07 and SA appeared in the list of top 25 places of origin at #12. The years 2015/16 marked the first time since in a decade that Saudi students did not experience double-digit growth. In the 2015/16 academic year, 61,287 students from SA were studying in the US, up 2.2% from the previous year with 2014/15 at 59,945 students (International Institute of Education, 2016).

International students from Saudi Arabia attending college in the US represent a cultural microcosm of international students in American universities. Within this group, however, there are some unique cultural differences and sources of influence, especially with regard to females, that are worth examining in research. At present, a number of studies exist about male Saudi students in higher education; however, studies about female Saudi students in higher education are lacking since SA women were not readily encouraged to study abroad prior to the initiation of the KASP in 2005/06. As a result of the KASP's focus on international education for both males and females, along with King Abdullah's personal approval and support, and in spite of the male guardian accompaniment requirement, 19,000 Saudi females were studying at US universities and colleges in 2012 as compared to 800 in 2004 (Kono, 2013). Middle Tennessee State University (MTSU), an approved institution under the Saudi Arabia Cultural Mission (SACM), saw a significant increase in the number of Saudi male students in graduate programs in 2010/11 along with a comparable increase of Saudi females in 2013. Currently, more than 1,200 Saudi students are enrolled at MTSU. The Saudi government has reported that KASP will run until 2020 which raises the question as to how these globally mobile Saudi male and female youths will impact the social, economic, and cultural transformation of Saudi society after acculturation experiences in the non-segregated, mixed-gender society and academic contexts of the US (Ahmed, M. A. , 2015; International Institute of Education, 2016). At present, the impact of SA international female students' cultural identity and its impact on the experience of being in a non-segregated, mixed-gender environment for the first time has not been the primary focus of many studies. Studies involving SA female international students and their acculturation experiences in the US are limited due to the fact that prior to 2005 very few Saudi females were educated in the US. As a result, it remains to be seen if the cross-cultural transition experiences of SA female students educated in the mixed-gender classrooms of the US will have any impact on society and / or academia in SA upon their return to the home country.

Furthermore, due to the lack of studies focused on SA women international students in the US and the significant cultural differences between SA and the US influencing the acculturation process of Saudi women in particular, future studies focusing on the acculturation process (cross-cultural transition) of Saudi international female students are warranted.

## **2. Methodology**

Because of the nature of the inquiry, the investigators utilized the action research process and took a qualitative stance in examining and analyzing the responses of SA international female graduate students regarding adjustment experiences that emerged during the acculturation (cross-cultural transition) process during their immersion experiences in the non-segregated US society and mixed-gender academic classroom setting. The qualitative approach in the action research process necessitated that naturalistic inquirers employ various collection modes to gather data from and about individuals within given contexts in order to answer overarching questions that frame the qualitative study. As a result, the qualitative approach taken in this study utilized multiple forms of data including surveys, open-ended oral interviews, and observational field notes for triangulation and coding processes and analysis procedures in order to identify emerging themes and patterns of thought resulting from examination, analysis, and categorization. Lastly, findings were reported in a narrative that provided descriptive, interpretive accounts of the naturally-occurring acculturation experiences of the SA international female students as they interacted for the first time in the non-segregated society and mixed-gender academic context of the US (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Craig, 2009; Craig & Young, 2009; Young, 1994).

### **The following overarching research question framed this study:**

1. What are the potential impacts that the experience of being in a non-segregated society and mixed-gender academic setting has on the cultural identity of the SA international female graduate student? Twenty international Saudi female graduate students were invited to participate in the qualitative study by investigators (two females). Eleven SA international female graduate students enrolled in a Master's in Education Degree out of a possible 20 agreed to take part in the qualitative study of female SA international graduate students and signed a release form agreeing to complete a written survey including open-ended questions / responses and participate in oral interviews. All participants completed a demographic survey in writing (English) regarding name, contact, gender, age, marital status, time in US, major, and city / country of origin. In addition, participants took part in an open-ended oral interview (English with a female Saudi interpreter present) which was audio-taped

and transcribed (English) by a research team member. Oral interview questions solicited information regarding expectations prior to arrival and reality as compared to expectations, cultural stress, significant differences in cultural practices in the US versus SA, gender roles within the university classroom and society in general in the US as compared to SA, most / least enjoyable activities, challenging or surprising happenings, experiences with discrimination or stereotyping, communication with Americans, changes in self, and level of well-being at various time intervals. In addition, observational notes were recorded by inquirers documenting experiences of the SA female students in an academic setting.

Investigators utilized coding for in-depth analysis of data sets. All data sets were transcribed, coded, and organized according to emerging themes and patterns (chunks of meaning) that revealed what participants thought and felt about their naturally-occurring lived experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Craig, 2009; Young, 1994) in the non-segregated social environment and mixed-gender academic context in the US as compared to the gender-segregated society and academia in SA. These findings provided an authentic glimpse into the complex experiences of female SA international graduate students studying and living in the US regarding their first-time interactions within non-segregated, mixed-gender social and academic contexts with each other and also with other male and female graduate students.

### 3. Findings

Analysis of data sets revealed that all 11 SA international female graduate students participating in the study, regardless of demographic data, experienced a plethora of challenges and barriers to success during their acculturation process.

All participants mentioned various cultural and social differences including gender-related differences, dietary foods, socially acceptable dress for females, religious practices, behavior of youth, friendliness of Americans, variety of activities and academic programs of study available to students, social and academic language difficulties, academic progress difficulty, lack of resources in place for international students on university, community, and personal levels especially in terms of English language supportive measures for non-native speakers of English.

As a result, data analysis revealed that emerging themes and categories of meaning included expectations about the US versus the reality, acculturative stress and adjustment, cultural differences in general between the US and SA, gender-related differences in society and academia between the US and SA, experiences of discrimination and / or curiosity, English language proficiency difficulties, relationship issues, lack of resources for support and help-seeking, and freedom and decision-making opportunities (see Table 1).

**Table 1. Emerging Categories / Patterns of Meaning**

Expectations about the US versus the reality
Acculturative stress / cultural adjustment
Cultural differences between the US and SA
Gender-related differences in society and academia between the US and SA
Academic climate differences between the US and SA classrooms
Experiences of discrimination / curiosity
English language proficiency necessary for success
Relationships with Americans – Social / Academic
Resources for support / help-seeking behavior
Freedom and decision-making opportunities available in the US

Further analysis of the categories of meaning allowed for data to be grouped into two significant contexts labeled by inquirers as psychosocial and academic with two main factors impacting the cultural transition process of the SA female students to success within these two contexts. The acculturation process (cross-cultural transition) within the psychosocial context and the academic context was most impacted by the SA student's level of English language proficiency and the significant influence that the female student's cultural identity had on the experience of being in a non-segregated, mixed-gender social and academic environment for the first time (see Table 2).

**Table 2. Emerging Themes within the Patterns of Meaning Impacting SA Women in the Psychosocial and Academic Contexts**

Freedom of thought and action and dress in US for women as opposed to in SA
Discrimination and curiosity more present in multiple states / several regions within social as well as within academic settings
Cultural differences between the US and SA – food, dress, religion, place of women in society and academic settings, so many responsibilities given to women
Active classroom environment – not only lecture & note-taking as in SA, but active participation and discussion required in US classroom
Males and females are equal in all aspects in the US – in US the women more like males than in SA
American women have “minds” of “men” vs SA women have “minds” of “women”
Social as well as academic relationships with Americans – in social and academic settings impacted by English language proficiency or lack thereof
Presence of traditional male support in US / male guardians, brothers, husbands
Non-segregated society and mixed-gender classroom setting in US as opposed to segregated society and single-gender classrooms in SA – females teach males via remote delivery and males may teach females via remoted delivery in SA -
Females can sit “next to” but “not touch” males in academic settings – only one woman mentioned a “friend” relationship with a US male
Women are more respected in SA – honored – taken care of – all done for them by the males in society – than in US where women are so independent and so much freedom and responsibility – driving was mentioned specifically

The effect of language proficiency on success or lack thereof within the social as well as the academic setting has been the focus of numerous studies involving non-native speakers of English and is agreeably of utmost importance both socially and educationally to international students studying in the US. However, since gender separation in Saudi Arabia is a cultural practice that occurs across all public and private domains and is driven both socially through cultural and religious discourse and politically through policy and regulation, it follows that the cultural identity of SA female students would have significant influence on the transitioning experience of cross-cultural contact in the social as well as academic setting (Alhazmi, A.& Nyland, B., 2013). As a result, the focus of this study is on the effect of cultural identity on the acculturation process and cross-cultural experiences of SA international female students studying and living in the non-segregated, mixed-gender environment of the US.

### 3.1 Participants' Comments and Narratives

Participants' actual words provide a richness to the findings that is unique to qualitative data. The following quotes from participants' comments are presented to support the thematic findings of the study within the contextual framework of the psychosocial and academic domains.

#### 3.1.1 Psychosocial Context

Participants' comments revealed how their cultural identity influenced their social interactions as well as their opinions, attitudes and feelings about their experiences:

The relationship [with Americans] is friendly and they are like helpful, anytime I need help, I find them here and like, classmates or any group activities I do with Americans I feel like I know them more and more. They are very helpful, supportive and I believe that even my neighbors, all of them are Americans, they are very nice and friendly too. Yeah, I've changed. I've become independent. I do some of what I don't do in Saudi Arabia, like driving a car and paying for an apartment. Those are things I didn't do in Saudi Arabia and I have to do them for myself.....It's good. It's good for me, I think, to be independent.

Most of the SA female students expressed satisfaction that they had more freedom to do things and to have choices: The freedom, like I can do whatever I want and I am responsible for my reactions, my doing, everything. I believe if I was in Saudi Arabia there would be some customs or traditions that would need to be followed, but here in the United States it's different. Even my family understands it's different, so they let me live alone, which is not good in Saudi Arabia, to live alone without a man, so it's the freedom, for sure.

When asked about expectations prior to coming to the US to study and main differences as well as what they found most enjoyable, participants responded: To be free. Before I came here, I knew that in the United States there were multiple cultures and personalities, especially on MTSU's campus. So I have to be free to accept each one personality and culture.

Maybe here, there's more freedom for women than Saudi Arabia. The women here can drive and there they can't. But I don't like to drive. Maybe here I feel more responsible than in my city. I do everything myself and I feel also more in contact with my family, husband and friends, more so than in my country. Absolutely, the freedom. We have the freedom, but, I mean, in my religion, we have the freedom, but from culture, from our habits and customs, no. More than half of the participants reported experiencing some discrimination, in different settings and in different states during their time in the US, while others reported experiencing no discrimination:

No, no. I had a fear about that, but I didn't experience any of that. Even in California or in Tennessee, I didn't face this problem. Yeah, like maybe they said for her bad words, but for me, no. Well I have just one, when I was in Oregon and I saw an old man. When he saw me he said "are you crazy?" and I said "why?" He said why are you wearing that veil/hijab and I said this is my religion and he said you are in the freedom country so you don't have to wear that. I said if this is a country for freedom then this is my freedom. Let me practice my freedom then. He said wow you are so crazy. I said it's ok.

I was living in Ohio and the language there is I think its clearer than here. So I could understand the people. I could practice the language there more than here. The people gave me a chance to talk with them. Even if I wanted to go to Walmart or do some shopping, they made conversation with me even if I don't want to talk with them. So I think they are so friendly.

[When I lived in Florida], when I used to cover my face, some people called me a ninja. Florida people are really racist. That's what they told us..... Me and my sister in law went to Walmart and we were grabbing some stuff. She stood and she looked at us and said, I cannot say the word (the f word) and also she said another word. We did not even look at her. I don't know why she said that.

Yeah, sure. So, I was with my friends. We were at Walmart. There was an old man who looked at us very disrespectful and he tried to talk to us badly. But we ignored us. He followed us walking and after we stopped at our car. He said do you have a bomb? Like that. And started screaming. We ignored him. He tried to make a problem of us but we tried to ignore him. After that we looked at him and he went to his car and he drove past us to make us afraid of him. I take caution then. ... Yeah it was the Walmart in [Tennessee]. I take caution to talk to anyone. I'm afraid to talk to anyone and they say don't talk to me.

Participants described different scenarios in which Saudi men were present in the lives of female students, often acting in a protective role:

**Interviewer:** You said you lived by yourself for the last couple of months. So your father was not living with you then?

**Participant:** No, he left me to have a vacation, he went back to our home for a few months, but now he is here.

**Interviewer:** So after you lived here for a while, how did the real experience compare to what you expected?

**Participant:** Yeah, I didn't like it in the beginning, because, many reasons, to be honest with you, when I came here first, I had my oldest brother. I went to Columbia, South Carolina and my oldest brother was a year ahead before us to arrive here to make sure everything was ready. So I came with another brother too, the oldest brother was married; still married. He was still controlling by brothers; I have no... eh... I have freedom, my family is open-minded, a lot of them, but, you know, men do everything for women. So, for my first year, I hated it. It's different and they make sure, because we are Muslims, you know, we cover our faces and they are pretty protect. They always are with us. I hate it. I want to go back home. It's difficult. Also, I didn't face any problems with Saudi men in my classes, it was okay. They had given me new experiences to build my personality outside of my gender/sex, because back home we have different schools for males. So, it was difficult, but later, when I got accepted to MTSU, I moved here alone. Both my brothers were studying at Columbia, and I have to bring another brother to stay with me or I have to stay until one can go with me. I came here for 2 weeks, those 2 weeks were the hardest 2 weeks of my life, being alone, being a beginner driver. I knew no people here. I had problems, I had problems with my neighbors. They were Saudi neighbors, but they wouldn't talk to me because I was alone. Ohhh, no men, don't talk to her. So, I cried a lot, alone, no friends, no American friends.

Comments were made about the equality present within the US between men and women, preference for SA traditional gender roles, and the perceptions that women are more respected in SA than in the US emerged in the data: In United States the way they treat the women here is very different than Saudi Arabia. We used to have everything to the man, because he's the responsible one, but here in the United States, I feel different because I can do anything like the man do. I'm equal to men, so this is the main difference.

Here in United States I practice what men do in my country? I mean, I see the difference between myself and the men in my country. So I prefer myself to be as what I am in Saudi Arabia, I don't want to be like a man in my country, because they have too much responsibilities on them. So I'm really happy to be a woman in my country, because you know here I drive all the time. I have to do everything by myself. No one is sharing these responsibilities. So yeah, it's good for me to be a woman in my country.

There's no difference between them [men and women]. Both of them have the same responsibilities. But they deal with me in my country, like a queen. You know they protect me all the time. They know my value in my country maybe more than here. Sorry to say that. There's no difference in men or women, even in the line at any place. In my country, they prefer to make the women at the front of the line, but here, it doesn't matter. You must be in the same place.

### 3.1.2 Academic Context

Participants reported their experiences in the academic setting, describing how their cultural identity affected their engagement with fellow classmates and professors as well as their attitudes toward their academic endeavors. In one case, a student reported discrimination by a professor. We don't have mixed classes [in Saudi Arabia]. We are separate. Since intermediate [school] until university. This is why I think that is the big, big issue here and makes me a lot, challenged me to be more relaxed and free during the class and practice that idea of it. Yes, I adjust. when I go to class, no one talked to me. Even the teacher, I had one class, with maybe 20 students in that class, that teacher is one of my advisors right now in my Ph.D. The teacher asked each student, what's going on? Am I different? Am I an alien? Why? I think because the way I look, because I wear this dress and later take it off, I look normal; my classmates started talking to me and teachers and I had very nice community with people.

With my professor of my class, on his note in D2L, we have a really old book to study in that class. It's from 2006 and it has all the updated information. He wrote a note on D2L for new information saying something about hijab. I'm the only one that wears a hijab in his class. I think he takes that personally, I don't know why.

Differences in gender segregation of society and classrooms in US and SA were described by the participants. In this context, participants also described relationships formed while living in the US and how their cultural identity may have been an influence. These relationships exist within the academic setting as well in social settings outside of the classroom and the university:

**Interviewer:** What are some of the main differences you have experienced in cultural beliefs and practices here in the United States compared to your country?

**Participant:** Mixed classes. We don't have mixed classes. We are separate. Since intermediate [school] until University. This is why I think that is the big, big issue here and makes me a lot, challenged me to be more relaxed and free during the class and practice that idea of it.

**Interviewer:** So after you lived here for a while, how did the real experience compare to what you expected?

**Participant:** Yeah, I didn't like it in the beginning, because, many reasons, to be honest with you, when I came here first, I had my oldest brother. I went to Columbia, South Carolina and my oldest brother was a year ahead before us to arrive here to make sure everything was ready. So I came with another brother too, the oldest brother was married; still married. He was still controlling by brothers; I have no... eh... I have freedom, my family is open-minded, a lot of them, but, you know, men do everything for women. So, for my first year, I hated it. It's different and they make sure, because we are Muslims, you know, we cover our faces and they are pretty protect. They always are with us. I hate it. I want to go back home. It's difficult. Also, I didn't face any problems with Saudi men in my classes, it was okay. They had given me new experiences to build my personality outside of my gender/sex, because back home we have different schools for males. So, it was difficult, but later, when I got accepted to MTSU, I moved here alone. Both my brothers were studying at Columbia, and I have to bring another brother to stay with me or I have to stay until one can go with me. I came here for 2 weeks, those 2 weeks were the hardest 2 weeks of my life, being alone, being a beginner driver. I knew no people here. I had problems, I had

problems with my neighbors. They were Saudi neighbors, but they wouldn't talk to me because I was alone. Ohhh, no men, don't talk to her. So, I cried a lot, alone, no friends, no American friends, when I go to class, no one talked to me. Even the teacher, I had one class, with maybe 20 students in that class, that teacher is one of my advisors right now in my Ph.D. The teacher asked each student (5:12, confused on what is being said), what's going on? Am I different? Am I an alien? Why? I think because the way I look, because I wear this dress and later take it off, I look normal; my classmates started talking to me and teachers and I had very nice community with people.

**Interviewer:** So that one single change in your dress, made a difference in how people interacted with you?

**Participant:** Yes.

**Interviewer:** What are the main differences in your experience here in the United States and your country? In cultural practices or cultural beliefs?

**Participant:** I think cultural beliefs is the first point and the second point is the relationship between women and men.

**Interviewer:** Would you explain that please?

**Participant:** Yeah, I studied at the university, my professor and all my friends were female. It was the first time I met people who were male. It wasn't difficult for me, because I traveled before. So I've talked with men before, but maybe it was difficult to talk with my friends who are male. Like, what's the way I should talk with males? I usually talk with females.

**Interviewer:** And did you figure that out or are you still learning that?

**Participant:** No I figured it out.

**Interviewer:** Okay, okay. So that was one of the big differences you experienced. What is the best thing about living here in the United States? What's the thing you enjoy the most?

**Participant:** I think I can live my life how I want. You can do anything you want, you can wear anything, and you can talk on any topic without any restrictions.

#### ***4. Conclusions - Implications - Limitations***

Data analysis revealed that issues surrounding gender norms and prejudices and the traditional Saudi cultural identity had a significant impact on the experience of living and studying in a non-segregated society and mixed-gender academic setting for SA international female graduate students. Although some may see findings of this qualitative study as limited since it focused on 11 female SA international graduate students at one university; due to the nature of the study and use of data based on human experience, sample size is not seen as a limitation by the inquirers. Although the data collected in this study from a small number of individuals cannot be generalized to a larger population, findings may however be transferable to similar settings (Bogdan, R. & Biklen, S. K., 2007; Cardona, B., Millan, M., Birnbaum, M., & Blount, I., 2013; & Corbin, J. M., & Strauss, A. L., 2015). Also, findings may be used in a positive manner to increase understanding and support for SA female international students navigating through various experiences of adjustment in the classroom and public and private life based on significant cultural differences regarding issues surrounding immersion in a non-segregated, mixed-gender environment for the first time.

At present, the impact of SA female international students' cultural identity and its influence on the experience of being in a mixed-gender environment for the first time has not been the focus of many studies. Studies involving SA female international students and their acculturation experiences in the US are limited due to the fact that prior to 2005 very few Saudi females were educated in the US. In addition, it remains to be seen if the cross-cultural transition experiences of SA female students educated in the mixed-gender classrooms of the US have any impact on society and / or academia in SA upon their return to the home country. Furthermore, due to the lack of studies focused on SA women international students in the US and the significant cultural differences between SA and the US impacting the acculturation process of Saudi women in particular, future studies similar to this one focusing on the acculturation process (cross-cultural transition) of Saudi international students, especially female students, are warranted.

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